

# Student Perceptions of Action, Relevance, and Pace

By Penny A. Bishop & Susanna W. Pflaum

*"We're supposed to be writing down stuff, and it just gets boring, and you just fade off."*

—Jacob, seventh grader

Continuing pressure of public accountability challenges middle school teachers more than ever to effectively engage students in learning. But how do teachers know their students are engaged? To measure engagement, the education community has long relied on formal observations. External observers have evaluated when, and sometimes to what extent, students are engaged by noting the degree to which students are "on task." While these observations can indeed be useful to teachers, real engagement is a complex phenomenon. Certainly the young adolescents in our middle schools occasionally "pretend attend," appearing to focus on the reading aloud, the dialogue ensuing, or the lecture at hand, while thinking about other matters. Conversely, there are times when students may be deeply engaged, while appearing to drift or daydream.

Both situations suggest the importance of turning to learners themselves to understand better the conditions of engagement. Yet, the student perspective continues to be underrepresented as a source of valuable data in reforming schools. Cook-Sather (2002) asserts,

We as educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education. (p. 3)

We examine here the results of a study in which we analyzed middle school students' perceptions of

academic engagement. These students' perceptions moved our understanding of engagement beyond the constraints of observable time on task to uncover the complexities inherent in learning in middle level classrooms.

## Accessing Perceptions of Engagement

The purpose of this article is two-fold: to present young adolescents' perceptions of the pedagogical conditions necessary for academic engagement; and to consider an alternative way to access these

Figure 1

### A Promising Way to Access Student Perceptions

While interview is an often used, traditional method for qualitative research, the use of drawing to access participant perception is in its infancy in the field of educational research. Drawing has a rich history as a form of intelligence testing in children (Goodenough, 1926) and as an indicator of the development of cognitive and artistic ability (Golomb, 1992); yet only a relatively small number of education researchers have used drawing as a means to capture student perception (Bebell, 2001; Chula, 1998; Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998; Jackson, Malec & Seldin, 1999; Kearney & Hyle, 2003; Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2000). Haney, Russell, and Jackson (1998) challenged us to consider the lack of "a single mention of using drawings as a method of educational research" (p.12), in the comprehensive, AERA sponsored volume, *Complementary Methods for Research in Education* (Jaeger, 1997), even within its new section on "arts-based inquiry." We add that an important subsequent publication, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) also opted not to include drawing as a potential source of data, omitting it in the promisingly entitled chapter, "On the Authority of the Image: Visual Methods at the Crossroads." Even among those who are using student drawing, fewer still couple the technique with interview, although the work of Robert Coles stands in marvelous contradiction (1967, 1990, 1995). Most of the education research involving drawing has instead involved the quantification of themes that emerge from the pictorial data (e.g. Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998). In sum, Olson's (1995) assessment still resonates today, "Rarely have researchers used drawing to provide a window into what students think about their education" (p. 29).

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important perceptions—through drawing. What facilitates middle school student engagement, from the student perspective? And, how might we find out?

To answer these central questions, we invited students from four middle schools in Vermont to talk and draw about their academic experiences. While the participants represented this New England state's relative ethnic homogeneity, the student bodies of the four schools typify the broad stratification of socioeconomic status of the state and its suburban and rural contexts. Two sites are rural in nature and serve primarily lower income students. The third site is a suburban school with a significantly higher income level. The fourth school is located in a 20 students, stratified by gender, grade level, and history of academic achievement, provided their perspectives on academic engagement through both drawing and interview.

We began this project with the expectation that the combination of drawing and interview would provide students with the opportunity to explain and elaborate on their thinking. To this end, we developed an interview protocol that married the two methods. The interview protocol consisted of four central questions or tasks. First, we asked students to describe a "typical school day" to provide context for their later responses. Second, we asked students to draw a picture of a learning experience in which they were engaged; and then we discussed that experience and the conditions that surrounded it. Next, each child was asked to draw a picture of a learning experience in which they were not engaged; again, we talked about the circumstances of the occasion. Fourth, students offered ideas about school reform, as we asked them what they would choose to do with a magic wand that could change anything about their school. During the following academic year, we returned to the students to verify our initial analysis and to extend the inquiry.

We offer these students' perceptions as an indication that students themselves are valuable sources of knowledge about what works for them, not as an assertion that any particular condition will enhance engagement for all students. The qualitative methods and small sample are well suited for our descriptive and analytical purposes, but certainly not for generalizing to young adolescents as a population. Rather, the perceptions are presented in hopes that educators will hear and see what works for these students, and that they might conduct their own inquiry honoring students as critics and informants of schooling. We believe doing so can empower teachers

to select teaching strategies that more closely align with how their own individual students learn.

The students in our study possessed very clear ideas about what teaching approaches and learning opportunities engaged them. During analysis of both drawings and interview data, several compelling themes emerged. Although elsewhere we discuss our findings specific to subject areas (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004), for the purposes of this article, we present those findings related primarily to teachers' pedagogical choices: active learning, relevant curriculum, and individualized pace. None of these approaches is new. In fact, each is a characteristic of developmentally responsive education, well supported by the growing body of literature describing the characteristics of effective middle schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 1995, 2003). What is new, however, is the opportunity to step inside the learner's mind without relying solely on verbal communication to uncover how students perceive their teachers' pedagogical choices as enhancing or inhibiting their engagement.

## Action in Learning

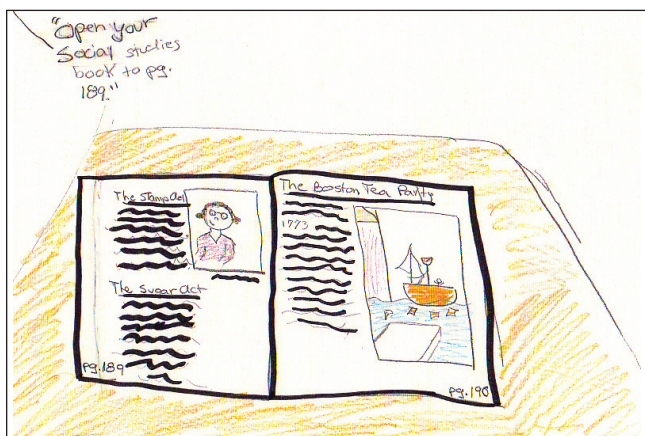
That active learning engages young adolescents surely will surprise neither the novice nor the veteran middle school teacher (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Stevenson, 2001). The extent to which students are aware of their own engagement requirements, however, may be revelatory for some. In Figures 2a and 2b, Samantha provided a student perspective on how being an active participant in the discovery of knowledge facilitated her learning.

In the first picture (2a), Samantha illustrated herself "offering to help find a certain thing on the

Figure 2a



Figure 2b



American Revolution.” She explained that she is engaged, “When everyone is interested in learning and stuff.” She eagerly discussed her excitement in seeking information and collaborating with others.

In the second (2b), she was not even physically depicted, so detached was she from the task. In stark contrast to the first drawing, here the teacher’s omnipresent voice from above instructs, “Open your textbooks to pg. 189.” She explained:

Well, I feel that when I’m working in a group and not in the textbooks that I learn the most— ‘cause the textbooks—some people, they don’t follow it. They put stuff in words and ways that you can’t really understand it.

Samantha’s two pictures are powerful examples of her need for active learning. In the first, Samantha was an active participant in her learning. She sought knowledge; she helped others; she constructed meaning through collaboration. In the second, while she chose to illustrate the same class, social studies, it is clear that she perceived her role in the learning process, and, therefore, her engagement, as quite different. Rather than providing active collaboration, the language of the text created barriers to her comprehension.

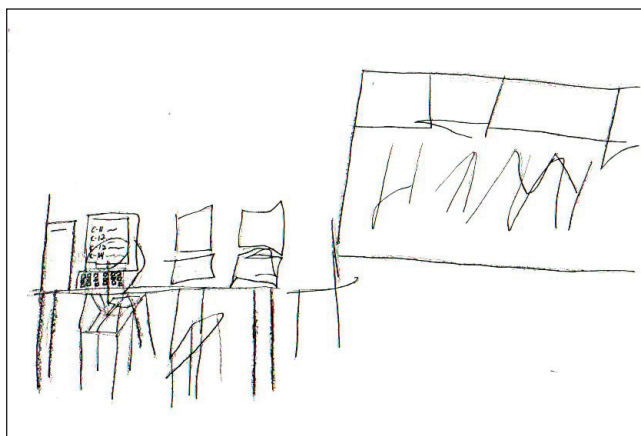
Many students echoed Samantha’s perspective. When asked about times during which they were not engaged in learning, these middle schoolers often described a level of passivity, a general lack of action, and often a reliance on either auditory or teacher-directed learning. Anthony, an eighth grader, offered two pictures (Figures 3a & 3b) that, while less detailed, also portrayed these important differences.

In the first drawing (3a), Anthony showed himself seated at a computer, busily compiling geometry theorems into one document to “prove by the end

of the year that they are all true.” Once again, we note, the learner is central and the teacher not featured. In the second (3b), the students are seated in a horseshoe configuration, facing two teachers with an overhead projector. In describing the time when he was not engaged, he explained:

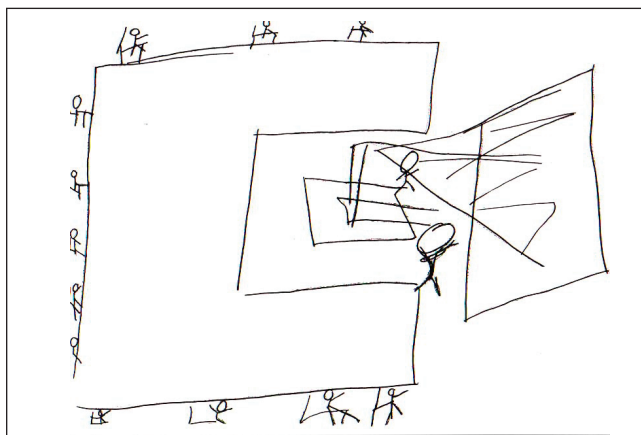
We hardly had anything to do. We were just getting told all of our information. It’s all lectures. You’d come in here and you did no work. You’d just sit there and some people would say, ‘Oh, it’s a really easy class.’ Yeah, it’s an easy class because it’s so boring.

Figure 3a



His explanation that he and the other students were expected to do “no work” and to “just sit there” revealed the inherent mismatch between his need for the active construction of knowledge and the teaching approach being implemented at that particular time. His emphasis on application in each drawing underscored the importance of action not for action’s sake, but toward the end of meaningful engagement in one’s learning.

Figure 3b



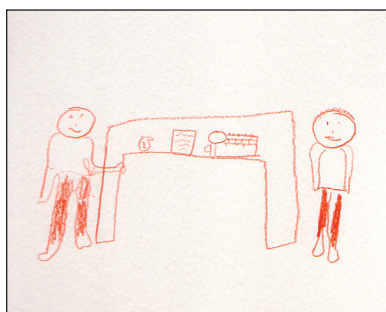


Seventh grader Jacob also contrasted a student-focused time with a more teacher-directed activity to depict his requirements for engagement (Figures 4a & 4b). In the first picture (4a), Jacob used color to represent himself and a peer, preparing for a science lab exploring density. He explained:

[Y]ou and your partner had to make a lab for density and see if water in its liquid state had more or less density than water in its solid state and you worked with balances and ... we could choose what we did, to do a lab.

Like Samantha and Anthony, Jacob highlighted the importance of action in engaged learning. While their task was clear, the way of solving the task was

Figure 4a



not predetermined, and they could employ active and collaborative means toward that end.

When asked about his second drawing (4b), for which he used only black drawing tools, Jacob explained:

This is usually in math, like, when teacher is just talking, and we're suppose to be writing down stuff, and it just gets boring, and you just fade off ... and ... and sometimes he writes something with chalk on the white board, and we have to copy down what he's writing, and he doesn't really explain what we're doing, so we're just writing down ... sometimes he talks, like, the whole period and makes you write down stuff.

Jacob's choice of perspective—as the teacher loomed much larger than the two, diminutive students seated at the front desk—is striking. Unlike his first illustration, which showed two students at the center of their learning without the teacher depicted, Jacob's detached time featured the teacher as the central object. When asked what kept him from feeling engaged, Jacob summarized, “Well, he was just talking the whole time. He didn't really do anything with the rest of the class time, I don't know.”

Duckworth (1996) posited that learners come to understand by being placed in a situation where they *develop* that understanding, as opposed to being told what they *ought* to understand. The students in our study would agree. The absence of the teacher in each of the above drawings of engagement does not

convey the irrelevance of the teacher; rather, it supports the current conversation in middle level schooling around student-centered learning as central to engagement. As with others in the study, Samantha, Anthony, and Jacob described with excitement the learning opportunities created by their teachers in which they actively constructed meaning, used technology, and worked with others. Perhaps because of these favorable experiences, they were able to contrast the others more starkly. These instances of engagement, characterized by active learning, and the examples of detachment, characterized more by teacher-directed activity, are clear indications of the students' awareness of peak learning moments that develop understanding.

## Relevance

Such peak learning moments were perceived by students to be relevant to them. Beane (1993) asserted that the best middle school curriculum is based upon addressing the personal and social concerns of young adolescents. NMSA advised, “Making curriculum relevant does not mean limiting content solely to students' pre-existing interests. Challenging curriculum creates new interests; it opens doors to new knowledge and opportunities; it ‘stretches’ students” (1995, p. 21). Few would argue with the premise that students become more invested in their learning when it is grounded in meaningful wondering and is relevant to their lives.

As she depicted two different classes and her reactions to both, Amelia identified relevance as critical to engagement. In the first (5a), Amelia was deeply

Figure 4b

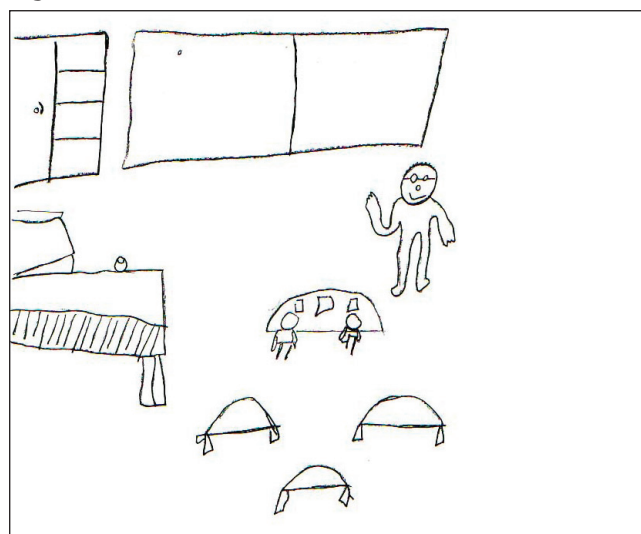


Figure 5a

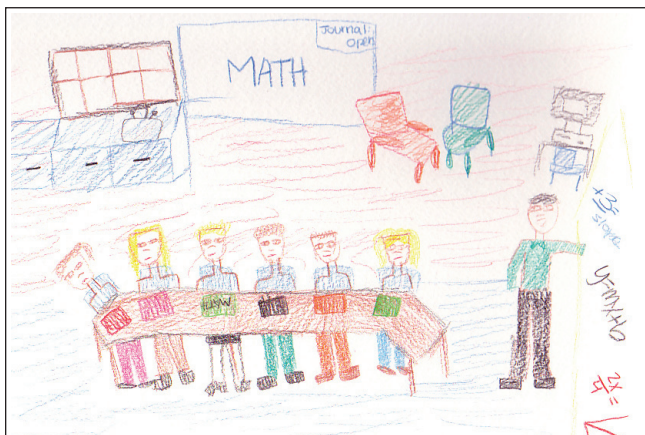


engaged in a discussion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* after having listened to the story on audiotape. She sketched lively faces with open mouths to depict dialogue. She stated that this was the first time she had learned about the concept of alienation. Amelia explained, "I didn't know it was such a big issue and then I came into the course and then I realized that it was, like, pretty important." She leaned forward to confide, "Most everybody is alienated so just, like, think how *you're* alienated."

In the second (5b), Amelia represented her math class, explaining, "Well, I don't know, he didn't really give us a task, he just, like, was teaching us and then we didn't know what to, like, apply it to." With these words, Amelia highlighted both the importance of action (here, a task) and relevance (for her, application). For Amelia, understanding the relevance of the learning at hand was central to her engagement.

When reflecting on a time of engagement in his schooling career, Casey chose to represent a collabo-

Figure 5b

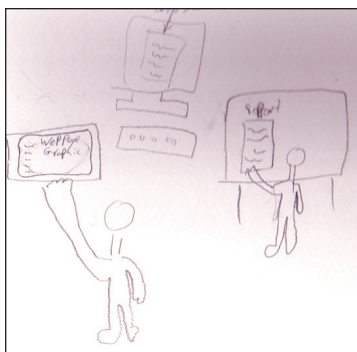


orative effort to invent a future form of technology, in which he readily identified the relevance and application (Figures 6a & 6b). Casey first drew two students side-by-side and busy at work on their computers (6a). He explained the learning opportunity behind his first picture:

One of my friends had diabetes and we thought—we saw the insulin pump, which is pretty much state of the art and it's broken five times, but it's nothing when it breaks on him, it's nothing really bad ... it has over a thousand filters, I think, to make sure it doesn't break, but it still does, but it doesn't result in anything fatal or anything that could damage him ... but our idea was, is, an implanted insulin pump.

Casey was eager to describe this project, highlighting the active and hands-on nature of the endeavor. As he described their work, his level of investment and ownership of the task became

Figure 6a



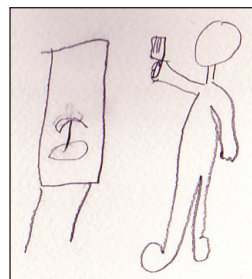
increasingly evident. Because he had had the opportunity to choose his own line of inquiry, he and his partner selected a project of deep importance and relevance to them.

In his second drawing (6b), Casey portrayed his art class. He explained:

Well, usually they give you, like, the basics of what you can do, like, now we're doing, we're making sculptures of cats and we have to, we have to do a drawing of it beforehand, and then after review it with the teacher. And then, if it's okay, we can start doing our sculpture, and then usually they'll have some input, like, you'll have [to] check with them every few steps.

While Casey's new technology project required intricate Web page graphics and design, he did not perceive himself to be an artist, nor did he feel engaged by the limitation of a predetermined focus for the artwork. Casey was deeply engaged by clear, "real world" application.

Figure 6b



For Amelia, relevance came in the form of knowing what to do with the knowledge and skills she was gaining. For Casey, relevance was linked to the world



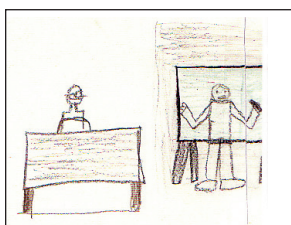
outside of school. Csikszentmihalyi recently offered to teachers, “The more they can show the relevance of what they’re doing to the life of the student, the better” (Sherer, 2002). We suspect Amelia and Casey would concur.

## Pace

In addition to the active, relevant, often collaborative, and technologically based examples, the vast majority of depictions of engagement represented times in which students were not bound by others’ needs. The instances of engagement were not whole group activities relying on all students’ mastery prior to moving forward. Rather, they were opportunities for learners to work at their own pace. Whether perceived as too fast or too slow, the pace of the classroom environment, the instruction, and the learning opportunities held real implications for students’ levels of engagement. Often, pace was connected to meeting students at the appropriate level of challenge, what some might consider teaching within their zones of proximal development, or difference between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without guidance (Vygotsky, 1978).

In his drawings (Figures 7a & 7b), Brian, a sixth grader, chose to contrast the previous year’s math class with his current one. Brian reported that, when he was in the fifth grade, he was in an advanced math class. In describing his first picture, he explained:

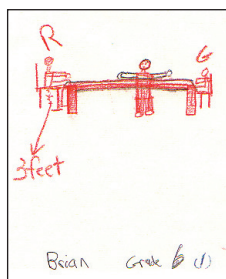
Figure 7a



I was sort of ahead of the class and he [the teacher] told me there were three smart kids, very intelligent kids, in the sixth grade who were doing 7th grade algebra instead of Everyday Math. ... I went into 7th grade algebra. And it was really fun.

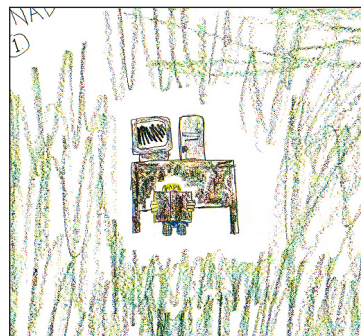
With his second drawing, he explained his discomfort with having to repeat earlier learned material. Because there were not enough other children for an advanced class during his sixth grade year, he found

Figure 7b



himself participating in a grade level math group, except for the occasional challenges he reported that his teacher found on the Internet. When asked how he was feeling, he replied:

Figure 8a



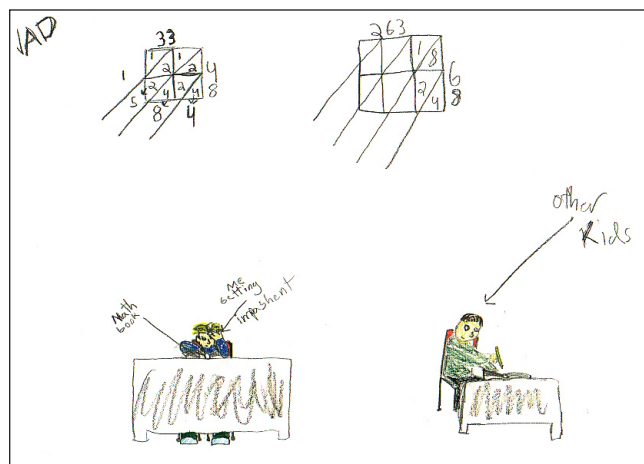
half hour because he [pointing to another student in his drawing] doesn’t know how to do, like, 2 to the tenth power.

When he talked about this picture, Brian stabbed at it with his finger. He put his head down to show us the extent of his frustration.

Nad, a fifth grader, contrasted reading with math in his two depictions (Figures 8a & 8b) to convey the importance of individualized pace. In describing his first picture, Nad explained:

I really like Silent Sustained Reading, ‘cause I like going at my own pace. ... Some kids in my group, they don’t read with any expression. And they read really slowly, even though I understand that they can’t read as well but ... I really, I like to just, I really like to read alone.

Figure 8b



That Nad displayed a greater sense of empathy than Brian did toward his peers is perhaps better

Figure 9a



understood in light of Nad's experience portrayed in his second drawing.

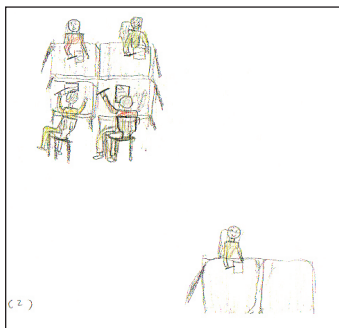
In it, he labeled his "math book," "me getting impashent," and "other kids." Detailing his experiences in math, Nad explained with candor, "I don't usually get it in my

head the first time he explains it." In both circumstances, Nad identified the opportunity to work at his own pace as central to his engagement. At times, such as in reading, this meant being able to move ahead of the other students; at other times, such as in math class, this translated into working at a slower pace than others in the classroom.

Lance, like Nad, chose to contrast reading with math. He featured himself holding a book (9a), deeply immersed at his desk. He drew a friend, striding over confidently, also with book in hand. When asked why he chose to draw himself reading this book, he replied, "because it's one of the better ones I've read. Because it was kind of short, and I like short books. And it was suspenseful." As he elaborated, it became clear that the opportunity to select his own texts and to read them on his own resulted in his engagement. Once again, pace, coupled with choice, is critical.

In contrast, he summarized his experience in math class, feeling rushed (9b). He explained, "All the kids are doing this paper so they could get out of class to go to recess ... and I didn't know how to do it, and I felt kind of nervous." Not only did the rushed pace set up barriers to engagement and comprehension, it instituted high stakes: the potential loss of recess. Although, at first glance, Lance's two

Figure 9b



drawings appear remarkably similar, careful examination reveals an important difference. In the first, he depicts deep immersion in reading. In the second, he depicts himself in relation to others. While his peers all have pencils poised on the paper, his is the only writing implement to

the side. He perceives the others as engaged; he is not.

These students' desire to work at their own pace and at an appropriate level of challenge resonates strongly with the recent, growing attention to differentiated instruction. In differentiated classrooms, learner differences are examined to form the basis for lesson planning. Student readiness and interest shape instruction, and students establish individual learning goals (Tomlinson, 2001). These students presented clear evidence that, for them, a differentiated classroom would indeed enhance their engagement.

## Conclusion

The obvious outcome of this study is that these middle school students value active approaches to studying relevant curriculum at their own pace. Additionally, collaboration, technology, and choice weave throughout these learning opportunities in compelling ways to enhance student engagement. Less obvious, yet perhaps more important, is inviting middle level learners into the dialogue about learning.

Cook-Sather (2002) chided, "There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve" (p. 3). Listening to learners can be problematic; it invites action. If we choose to listen, one might argue, we have a responsibility to act upon our new understandings in real and meaningful ways. If students were viewed as possessing insider knowledge, how might classrooms change?

Further, in what ways might we "listen?" If we as teachers and researchers always rely on the traditional interview or other verbal forms of self-report data, do we limit what we might learn from less verbal students—students for whom most of schooling already does not cater? And to what extent is the formal, external observation of time-on-task limiting, or even misleading, in its contribution? The use of drawing to access participant perception provides different interpretations than does the use of formal observations. For instance, in Samantha's time of detachment, an observer might infer that she is listening, reading, and engaged in the material when, in fact, she reports she is not. Likewise, having students seated in a horseshoe position watching an overhead projector could lead an observer to think the students are engaged, when Anthony conveys his detachment instead. In contrast, Nad's time of

silent sustained reading could look like detachment to an observer; but instead, he identifies it as engagement. To the observer, Samantha's detachment could appear as Nad's engagement, and only through self-reports could the difference be identified. Student drawings provide different interpretations than formal observations.

The students in this study varied widely. Some came from affluence and privilege; others did not. Some struggled academically; others found school to be a good fit. Regardless, all students contributed meaningfully to the dialogue when allowed into the conversation. The postmodern critique of traditional research paradigms asserts that persons who are powerful and established typically are those who interpret schooling while the less powerful and less established are not heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). We attempted to invite students into the conversation about learning. By imagining and depicting in drawing and by talking about their selected events, the students became authors of their own knowledge. They shared their expertise on what facilitates their learning in schools. Nicholls and Hazzard (1993) invited us to consider:

Whether or not we acknowledge it, students are curriculum theorists and critics of schooling. If they are drawn into the conversation about the purposes and practice of education, we may all learn useful lessons. Children can change our priorities and shape our stories in unexpected and interesting ways. Education can become an adventure in which teachers, researchers, and children together learn new questions as well as answers, so that their lessons are never complete. (p. 8)

We too posit that middle school students have much to communicate about the quality of their schooling experiences, both through their voices and through alternative means. Students are indeed valuable critics of schooling. They provide rich insight into what works for them and, perhaps even more clearly, what does not.

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